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ABSTRACT

Changes in the context of the national educational enterprise that influence federal education information dissemination policy and programs are discussed. Education issues claiming the attention of educators, policymakers, and the general public are identified as the first area of contextual change. Two issues currently of public concern--the need to restore excellence to our schools and the growing problem of students at risk--are shown to influence the content and methods of dissemination. The view of school-based professionals held by policymakers and the use of knowledge gained through the experience and research of disseminators are also discussed as issues framing the context of federal information dissemination. ERIC and the regional laboratory program are cited as examples of ways in which knowledge from research and practice shapes dissemination policy. The second broad area of contextual change is identified as changes in technology, and the effects of these changes on federal dissemination are examined. A discussion of how federal dissemination influences the educational context follows, and it is concluded that context influences policy and policy influences context. Nine references and a list of participants at the 1988 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Symposium on Federal Programs in Educational Dissemination are included. (MES)

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THE ROLE OF CONTEXT CHANGES IN FEDERAL EDUCATION DISSEMINATION

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THE ROLE OF CONTEXT CHANGES IN FEDERAL EDUCATION DISSEMINATION

Introduction

The federal interest in dissemination of education information is hardly new. We have only to note that the **first** Department of Education was established with a principal mission of collecting and disseminating education information, and that dissemination remains important in discussions of the Department's mission.

In this paper, I will discuss certain changes in the context of the national educational enterprise that influence federal dissemination policy and programs. In brief, the contextual changes I will cite are in the issues that grab the attention of educators, policymakers, and the general public and in technology. The paper is organized around those two general areas of contextual change. For each, I briefly summarize the past and current issues and then indicate how those alterations have influenced federal dissemination policy and practice. The paper concludes with a discussion of how federal dissemination policy, in turn, influences the context of education dissemination.

Before proceeding, I wish to indicate the perspective from which I view the dissemination scene. I was a classroom teacher during the wave of curriculum reform of the sixties and, through my own efforts and the efforts of supervisors and colleagues, was able to **receive** the results of those efforts. I was also involved in a teacher-developed curriculum project and, at that time, became aware of the problems inherent in the purely "sending" mode of dissemiation. After my rebirth as a researcher, I directed a teacher-oriented knowledge synthesis project (the R&D Interpretation Service) and then became a member (and, later, leader) of the unit at the National Institute of Education that was responsible for research and evaluation on dissemination processes. I am now a practicing disseminator in a regional educational laboratory. I raise all of this to indicate that my views of the role of context vis-a-vis federal dissemination are rooted in both research and practice perspectives. In my life, changing contexts and policies **have** made a difference.

Issues in Education

The issues that grab the attention of educators, policymakers, and the public exert a major influence on Federal dissemination processes and content. When I began teachingin the post-Sputnik 1960's, reform efforts were directed at curriculum, and, within curriculum, at teaching students more than facts but also what was then called the structure of the disciplines. These programs, and the teacher training that accompanied them, were justified as part of a national defense initiative. While I was still in the classroom, the emerging issue became poverty, and Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), with major focus on Title I (now Chapter 1 of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act-ECIA). The focus on poverty later developed into a broader concern with equity--for bilingual students, for the handicapped, for women. Currently, public concern is focused on two issues: the need to restore "excellence" to our schools and the growing problem of students

who are at risk. Both concerns are raised in the context of the nation's lack of economic competitiveness.

The issues of concern to the public and educators influenced not only the content of what was disseminated, but also federal policy toward the appropriate structures and methods for disseminating information to support change. For example, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) summer institutes for teachers were a logical vehicle for disseminating discipline-based curricular innovations. If one desires students to understand the structure of a discipline and become biologists, physicists, and historians aborning, teachers must also become proto-biologists, -physicists, and -historians. That requires immersion in the discipline and in pedagogical techniques that can support the building of disciplinary knowledge and skills.

In contrast, the development of the ERIC system arose from the very different focus of ESEA (see Tressler, 1982).

The judgment of Federal workers was that knowledge **did** exist to help school-based personnel prepare Title I proposals and deliver instruction to disadvantaged students, but the problem was lack of access to it. The problem of student access to learning was mirrored in some ways by the problem of educators' limited access to necessary information.

The context for federal dissemination is framed by two additional sets of issues--no matter what the substantive agenda is. The first involves the view of school-based professionals held by policymakers; the second, the use of knowledge gained through the experience and research of disseminators.

Policymakers can view school people as a set of individuals, each with her or his own classroom or school, or as members of a team whose work life encompasses the atmosphere and learning throughout the school (or even district or state). Different dissemination processes and structures fit these different views. For example, if one sees teachers as (a group of) individuals, the focus would be on ensuring that each teacher has access to knowledge--even in the privacy in his/her own home. In fact, I would argue that the current focus of ERIC pushes toward this view because it emphasizes the need to build structures so that each teacher, independently, uses the system. An alternative view, that of school professionals as part of a team, is the central focus of a system like the National Diffusion Network (NDN), in which a district or school adopts an exemplary program, and of past programs, such as the R&D Utilization Program, that focus on dissemination through local problem-solving, staff development, and technical assistance.

I need to be clear in what I'm explaining: school-based professionals are both individuals and part of a team. A comprehensive dissemination policy would embrace both aspects of professional life. But as a contextual matter, federal policy is influenced by the overarching view of the nature of the work life of teachers, counselors, principals, and others in our schools. Currently, this issue is being resolved, I would argue, on the side of teachers as individuals--as indicated by the changes promulgated for ERIC and the less than enthusiastic support for NDN (although that lack of enthusiasm is ascribed to different concerns).

A second issue that provides context for dissemination policy is how knowledge from research and practice is used to shape that policy. This issue is clearly not one that grabs the public, but it is of concern to educators. We have learned much about the dissemination and other processes needed to bring about school change. Others on this panel have more to say about this than I, but I want to indicate how some of what we have learned serves as context for federal dissemination policy. Two federal dissemination programs will serve as examples, ERIC and the regional laboratory program.

ERIC is a system for organizing the storage of information, which then can be provided on demand. It covers a broad range of issues--indeed, the "ideal ERIC" would contain everything of potential value to anyone concerned about education. Studies of ERIC over the years (see Havelock, 1979 for a synthesis; King Research, 1982) have shown that, in fact, it is difficult for individual teachers or administrators to search ERIC to find out what they want to know. And that is not surprising--after all, creating category systems for the wealth of topics that are important in education must lead to a complex system. As a result, a support system for ERIC has developed--a group of intermediaries who are comfortable with the language and action of "negotiating the question." The knowledge gained from studies of ERIC and its use helped create the context for support for federal programs such as the State Dissemination Capacity Building Program and for other intermediate organizations.

The history of the regional educational laboratories is complex and reflects a set of political as well as educational contextual changes. In this paragraph, I will focus **only** on how understanding of dissemination influences the policies toward labs and how they conduct business. When labs were originally founded, the image of their core function was an engineering one. Basic research would be transformed, through curriculum, so that students would be taught in the best way known. Lab dissemination was geared to the adoption and implementation of research-based curricula.

Those objectives began to be called into question by the Berman and McLaughlin study (1977-1978), which was interpreted to mean that successful implementation was based more on the needs of the site than on the research that backed the curriculum. Successful implementation involved a process of "mutual adaptation"--the program as well as the school changed. (For a critical view of this interpretation, see Datta, 1981.) Other research, as well, indicated the importance of site involvement in defining the problem and in the choice of the solution. Research also stressed the importance of external assistance throughout the process of change (see Crandall, et. al. 1983). Labs began to approach their dissemination tasks--and define their role--differently. Federal policy emphasized the "facilitative" aspects of dissemination (Research and Educational Practice, 1977). And a major study of federal dissemination programs (Louis, et.al., 1984) indicated that labs, in fact, served an important facilitative function for dissemination. This finding was reified to define the **total** lab program under current contracts.

The two examples cited indicate that increased knowledge about dissemination programs provides a context for policy changes. They also indicate that

knowledge is subject to site adaptation in the federal government as well as in schools!

Conclusion: In this section, I have presented the view that, at least in part, federal education dissemination policy and programs are influenced by the intellectual context in which they are developed. This influence is both substantive--the content of that which the federal government fosters dissemination--and procedural--the ways in which dissemination is structured. Obviously, there are complexities in the influence of intellectual issues on dissemination policy and practices that are not discussed in this brief paper. For one, old programs do not tend to die as new programs are developed. So at any given time, there are programs embracing both different substance and using different processes. Another complexity rests on the fact that some of the concerns outlined here are multi-dimensional, with advocates of varying views having some degree of effect on policy in general and dissemination policy in particular. The analyis I offer indicates the importance of conceptual matters in creating a context for policy.

Technology

Changing technology is part of the context for educational dissemination policy and practice. It makes some approaches possible, some goals achievable, and may even influence the content of what is viewed as "disseminable." In this section, I will list some technological changes and then discuss how they have influenced federal dissemination.

The changes:

1. When I began teaching, I could give students my own products (tests, syllabi) **only** by laboriously cutting a stencil (on a manual typewriter--only rich institutions had electric typewriters) and dirtying my hands on the mimeo machine. The same conditions applied to researchers with their "works in progress" or papers at AERA. I wrote this paper on a computer and ran off copies on a Xerox machine.

2. When I first used ERIC, the librarian at the university that housed the only ERIC collection in the area handed over a stack of Resources in Education for me to search manually. There was, thank goodness, a microfiche reader! Now I can go to at least five sites in the area and have help with searching ERIC on line. At least two of those sites provide ERIC on CD-ROM.

3. During the time that I taught, schools began sharing time of computers owned by large institutions. Because it was both expensive and cumbersome, computer use was confined to a few functions. Within universities, there were computer centers, accessible for research. But I also remember waiting for hours to get my turn. Now I--and millions like me--own our own. Some of us even own two or more! And we can use modems to share information with others.

These changes are indicative of the kinds of changes that technology has brought. One could add a whole range of telecommunications--satellite programs to bring information about a variety of NDN programs from across the country to an isolated area, staff development provided to rural teachers on TV, etc.

What technology has done is to make widespread provision of information possible, and one can receive much of it on one's own schedule. How has this influenced federal dissemination? First, federal programs have adopted the new technology--ERIC, CD-ROM; NDN, satellite communication.

Second, the adoption of the technology has influenced the goals of dissemination programs. Earlier, a goal of providing every teacher with personal access to ERIC would have been seen as unreasonable. Now it is not. From my perspective this has both positive and negative consequences. On the negative side, there is a push that says "what can be, should be," and ERIC (and other dissemination programs) are beginning to be accountable for reaching everyone. Such a focus precludes discussion of the purposes of dissemination and of the cognitive and organizational complexities of using information. More positively, ease of access to information opens the possibility of its equitable distribution. A situation in which where one lives or how much money one has no longer determines what one can know.

Finally, technological changes and more open access to knowledge have interacted with current political stances in a manner that is disturbing to me. If access to information is no longer based on personal or organizational characteristics, and if there is a desire to restrict access, the only solution is to restrict the information that is housed within the dissemination systems. And there are signs that this administration understands the potential impact of the technological changes and <u>is</u> restricting the available information. For example, the interpretation of "educational significance" recently employed by the review of programs for NDN has, at the least, the effect of limiting access to programs that are effective in achieving objectives contrary to the administration's view of what matters in education. A second example is the invocation of the Publication Review Board to limit the number of copies of documents produced by labs at the same time as the technology, through such means as desktop publishing, makes it easy and inexpensive to disseminate many copies of attractive and enticing products. A cynic might think, "Oh, now that everyone can get information about good programs and new research, policymakers are concerned about what that research and those programs say."

<u>Conclusion:</u> Technology always forms a context for policy. The nature of the technological revolution under way is that it profoundly changes the ease of information dissemination and, as a result, has great impact on Federal dissemination policy. Whether the policy choice will be for openness (and dare I say, the free market of ideas) or for restriction is still unclear. Technology opens possibilities, but it also raises questions about which possibilities should be pursued. Those questions are policy questions in the deepest sense, involving choices based on values.

Federal Dissemination Policy's Influence on Context

The first two sections of this paper looked at how changing contexts, intellectual and technological, influence federal dissemination. In this section, I change the figure and the ground and discuss how federal dissemination influences the educational context. I do so because to view federal action as only a result of outside forces is to misunderstand the nature of government. Federal policy is **supposed** to have effects, and it is worthwhile in this symposium to explore the effects of dissemination policy on the educational context.

The discussion that follows is based on the assumption that dissemination is an ancillary function in education. That is, it exists to assist in reaching substantive goals, for example, improved learning for all students. Those of us involved in dissemination activities are committed to the proposition that spreading the use of research and exemplary practice will, in fact, help to achieve desired educational ends. But the focus on spread and use is **ours**; teachers, parents, administrators, and others focus on the **effects** of use. The issue for most people is whether or not students are learning, not whether or not they are doing so as a result of research utilization.

As a consequence, changing federal dissemination policies and practices have a great influence on the field of dissemination. Federal programs helped develop a cadre of professionals whose job was to help others gain access to and use information that would help achieve their goals. But federal programs have effects beyond their own achievements--they constitute an announcement that something is important. This is the "bully pulpit" in programmatic terms. As federal funding for programs that address the variety of dissemination activities has diminished so has funding from other sources. So the rich array of intermediaries that are able to help others find and use information no longer exists. And even those who do exist, have defined their mission more narrowly. For example, the San Mateo Educational Resource Center (SMERC) no longer contracts for services outside its own immediate area.

Another effect of the diminution (see Clark, 1981) of the federal role in dissemination is that states, within the context of their own reform movements, have adopted practices that are dissemination-based. Most of these do not exist in offices labeled "dissemination" but as part of the states' staff development efforts. One example of dissemination activities that are not labeled as such as the number of Leadership Academies, devoted to helping principals and other administrators adopt practices based on recent research on school administration. (The recent development of Project LEAD within the department of education illustrates, once again, that federal dissemination efforts respond to substantive issues of importance to educators and the general public. Many state level academies preceded Project LEAD). Whether it is good or bad to have disseminators who do not see themselves as disseminators is a matter of perspective.

Summary: The examples used in this section are intended to illustrate the fact that federal dissemination policy influences the dissemination and educational context as well as being influenced by it. On the one hand, changing educational policy has resulted in a more limited array of dissemination services.

On the other hand, at least some dissemination functions have been adopted by professionals who identify themselves with other sub-fields of education. The long term impact of these changes should be studied, but, unfortunately, the area in which federal attention currently is least directed is research on dissemination and knowledge use.

Conclusion

Context influences policy and policy influences context. Those have been the important points of the paper. But the two link in complex ways, and it is through research that we begin to sort those out. Further, understanding the role of context in policy and vice versa allows us to develop policies and practices that are responsive to the context in order to help us reach our goals. Rather than summarize the points in the paper, I would like to conclude with a call for federal dissemination activities to include a research component. The contributions of earlier dissemination and knowledge use research to efforts to improve education have been great, but we need to build upon that base, particularly since many of the structures that supported dissemination and use have changed.

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